# Managing Millennials:
## Can Science Help?

**By Judy Agnew, Ph.D.**

How do you effectively manage a generation of workers who grew up with the immediate gratification of video games, got trophies for just showing up, and were raised by helicopter parents (over-indulgent parents who "hover" over their child's every need)? This is a growing challenge faced by those who are tasked to manage Millennials. With differing work ethics and expectations, the divide between these generations puts stress on even strong organizations. Understanding these differences is part of the answer,

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but adopting different management strategies is really the only way to attract, retain, and bring out the best in this new generation of workers.

**So what makes Millennials different—what defines them?** Various researchers summarize this generation (born after 1980) as technologically savvy, confident, upbeat/optimistic, and on track to being the most educated generation in U.S. history. They like social interaction and thus thrive in team environments; they are creative, like challenges, and solving problems. This is the good stuff. They also have less patience, are less loyal, want to see immediate results, demand more feedback and more recognition, including rapid pay raises and promotions, want flexible work hours, want options to work from home, and demand a work/life balance. This is the challenging stuff.

Behaviorally speaking, each generation, like each individual, is a product of a reinforcement history. Individual and group behavior is shaped over time by environmental contingencies (antecedents and consequences) including social (provided by parents, teachers, peers, etc.), economic (socio-economic status, depressions, booms, etc.), and political (wars, political unrest/stability, political oppression, etc.) among others. Common behaviors in certain generations are the result of shared generational reinforcement histories. These were created by the prevalent parenting practices, economic conditions, current technology, etc. of that time. Reinforcement history can shape behaviors that endure a lifetime, but fear not—if contingencies change, behaviors will change as well.

**What characterizes the reinforcement history of Millennials is frequent feedback and reinforcement.** Critics say that the feedback Millenials received during their early years was all positive and the reinforcement non-contingent. **The "trophy for showing up" and "not keeping score when young kids play sports"** are often cited as examples of what are considered to be more pervasive trends. While this generation has certainly experienced more non-contingent positive praise, it is my experience that kids understand the difference between contingent and non-contingent recognition. Ask my kids which of their many trophies are most valuable to them and they point to the ones they earned through skill and effort, not the ones they got for showing up. Furthermore, while parents and coaches may be making mistakes of non-contingency, video games do not. Every move is either reinforced or punished and kids learn quickly to adjust their behavior to get desired outcomes. They are very accustomed to negative feedback—their video game personas "die" over and over as a result of their behavior, and they learn to simply use the feedback to get better. So this reinforcement history of frequent feedback (positive and negative) and reinforcement is not all bad.

Another characteristic of this generation is that **they want to make a difference.** While previous generations focused on getting a "good job," which usually meant one with stability, good pay, and benefits, this generation wants their work to matter. Thus, they are less willing than previous generations to work in a vacuum–going for long periods of time without knowing if what they are doing is making a difference. This generation will work hard but they need to see impact.

So how can science help? It turns out that what Millennials are asking for is what the science of behavior tells us is the best way to manage performance–of any generation. According to research done by Jay Gilbert (*Gilbert, September/October 2011*), Millennials want frequent and specific feedback and they don't mind negative feedback if it makes it clear how to improve. They want clear expectations and want to know where they stand relative to those expectations. This is exactly what the science of behavior tells us to do to produce optimum work environments: pinpoint what you want, provide frequent and specific feedback on performance and provide contingent positive reinforcement for progress and accomplishment (ideally linked to impact). Millennials are demanding good management whereas other generations did not. **Could it be that these tattooed, pierced, always-plugged-in young adults are going to make it better for all of us? I think so.**

In addition to promoting good management practices there is another very important characteristic of Millennials– **work/home balance and flexible work schedules.** According to Pew Research (*Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, February 24, 2010*), they prioritize parenthood and marriage far above career and financial success. **They are willing to work hard but they want more time with their family.** How can organizations that have relied on 60+ hour work weeks continue to be successful with workers who want to keep it closer to 40? This is a serious dilemma but, again, the science provides part of the answer. Managers have to ensure that the hours that are worked are maximally productive. All non-essential work needs to be minimized. Managers need to be able to assess what employees are doing (behaviors) and what impact that work is having. This is possible, but it requires different measures of performance and more collaboration between workers and managers

to identify and shape the most productive, impactful behaviors. This is not micromanaging, it is good coaching and mentoring that helps employees learn the most effective ways to do their work. Taking a scientific approach to figuring out high and low impact behaviors will allow all of us to focus on what really drives the business and still get home to our families for dinner.

The introduction of Millennials into the workplace may frustrate older generations, but I predict Millennials are going to help reshape the world of work in ways that will benefit us all, business included. Companies and managers that adopt management strategies better suited to Millennial reinforcement histories are the companies/managers that will attract and retain the best of this generation as well as bring out the best in other generations.

*The Millennials: A New Generation of Employees, A New Set of Engagement Policies.* Gilbert, J. (September/October 2011). The Workplace.

*Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change* Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends.

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## [About the Author]

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As senior vice president of safety solutions, Judy spends her time helping clients create sustainable safety cultures. She also helps clients with strategy execution beyond safety, and general management and leadership improvement across cultural and generational differences. In her free time, Judy can be found on a pool deck, soccer pitch or volleyball court cheering for her two kids.

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